Archaeological Excavations at Birchhabili Tila, Sikri

Location: Agra Circle, Uttar Pradesh
Site Context: Located on the bank of the lake traditionally referred to as 'Moti Jheel' and 'Darbar Jheel' in general literature.

1. Overview and Objectives

Birchhabili Tila was scientifically excavated to ascertain the results of previous explorations and the existence of *in situ*architectural remains. The excavations successfully revealed Jaina sculptures, architectural members, and the base (*adhishthana*) of a temple at its southern portion, confirming the existence of a Jaina temple at Sikri between the 9th and 11th centuries CE.

2. Chronological Phases

Period I: Habitation Deposit (6th–8th Century CE)

- **Structural Remains:** Room-like structures and cultural deposits dating between the 6th and 8th centuries AD.

- **Late Gupta Era Evidence:** The discovery of a red sandstone relief sculpture of Ambika (dated 6th–7th century CE) featuring relatively simple ornamentation and drapery in low relief.

- **Significance:** These findings strongly suggest the existence of an early Jaina shrine at the site during the Late Gupta period.

Period II: Temple Construction (9th–12th Century CE)

- **Architecture:** Constructed directly over the properly leveled habitation deposit of Period I. Represented by the base/platform (*adhishthana*) of a temple, built using massive, dressed sandstone blocks regularly placed upon one another.

- **Key Find:** A broken head of a Parshvanath sculpture was discovered near the lower step of the temple's projection.

Post-Temple Period

- **Subsequent Habitation:** Residential complexes and structures were found raised directly over the temple remains, indicating that secular habitation occurred after the temple fell into disuse.

3. Notable Discoveries and Features

The Ritual Disposal Pit (*Visarjan*)

An important archaeological find was a man-made pit built from stone slabs, specifically prepared for the religious disposal (*visarjan*) of damaged and mutilated sculptures.

- **Dimensions:** 1.33 meters deep, covered with massive stone slabs across two levels.

- **Contents:** Over 30 sculptures were recovered here.

    - An image of the Yakshi Ambika (broken into two pieces) was found placed upside down.

    - Various Tirthankar images including Sambhavnath, Rishabhnath, Shantinath, and Kunthunath (seated in *Padmasana* posture without *lanchhanas*).

    - Yakshi images (Ambika, Nidhi, etc.) and fragmentary Tirthankar statues.

    - Some statues were placed in perfectly upright, seated positions, while others were laid in a haphazard manner.

The Jaina Shrutidevi Saraswati

A unique and highly significant sculpture recovered was the Jaina Shrutidevi Saraswati.

- **Iconography:** Four-armed deity holding a *Vara* (boon-giving gesture), *Kamala* (lotus), *Pustaka* (book), and *Mala*(rosary). It features a halo, rich ornaments, and a *Hamsa* (swan) as a vehicle.

- **Jaina Confirmation:** The icon features miniature Jina images on its side panels, confirming its Jaina identity in strict accordance with Jaina *Vastu* and *Pratima* (iconographic) texts, differentiating it from Hindu depictions of Saraswati.

4. Epigraphical Evidence

The excavation yielded a large number of inscribed Jaina sculptures, with inscriptions mostly located on the pedestals (*pithas*). The contents of these inscriptions are primarily donatory in nature.

- **Early Brahmi Fragment:** A fragmentary red sandstone piece bearing two letters in Brahmi script, paleographically referable to the 2nd or 3rd century AD.

- **Shrutidevi Saraswati Inscription (AD 1010):** A three-line inscription on the pedestal of the Saraswati image dated Vikram Samvat 1069 (AD 1010).

    - Mentions the locality as **'SAIKRIKYA'** (historically confirming the ancient name of Sikri).

    - References **'Shanti Vimala Acharya Vasatau'**.

    - Mentions King Vajram (**Vajradaman** of the **Kachchhapaghata** dynasty). This suggests that King Vajradaman was still on the throne in Gwalior in AD 1010, challenging his traditionally accepted dates (AD 975–995).

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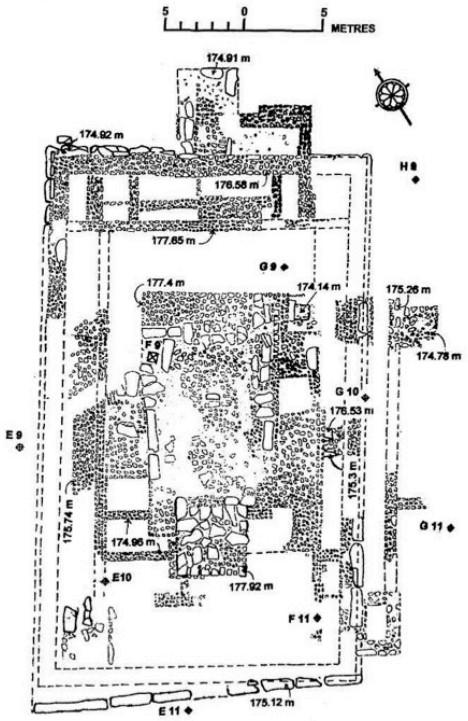
TEMPLE PLAN, BIRCHHABILI TILA, FATEHPUR SIKRI



Orajhar: structural remains of Periods II, III A-B